peacetime like a liminal space

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by mercess

Summary

After the war, Bucky tries to lose himself in New York City. Gale finds him anyway.

With a yawn, John unlocks the door and pulls it open, and that yawn becomes a squeak, which becomes a cough, which becomes “Buck?” He squeezes his eyes shut, rubs them with his knuckles, and pries them back open.

Gale is still there in the soft light of the hotel hallway, the leather of his A-3 jacket gleaming and crusher cap angled just-so, toothpick a taunt and temptation both in the corner of his mouth. He’s smirking and, if John didn’t know better, blushing as he gives John a quick once-over. John looks down at himself. Lipstick is still smeared on his nipples. Clearing his throat, he tugs the robe tighter shut, shielding his chest from Gale’s sight.

Blue eyes flick up to his, amusement crystal clear. John feels faint. Perhaps this is how a Victorian felt upon seeing an ankle.

“Hey, Major,” Gale says, his familiar drawl like fingernails over John’s skin, scattering goosebumps. John wants to shiver. He abstains. “You’re a hard man to find.”

Notes

Hello!! A brief disclaimer: While I have never been to New York City, I have been to other big cities, such as Los Angeles and Washington D.C. As such, I made NYC a patchwork and trusted y'all to ignore any inaccuracies for the sake of the wwii yaoi porn.

Also, yes, I'm very much playing fast and loose with history (did queer nightclubs exist in the 40s? Oh, without a doubt. Were they anything like this one? Who's to say! The one you'll find in this fic is a hodgepodge of different queer nightclubs of the 60s/70s, such as Crisco Disco and Paradise Garage). I'm queer with a B.A. in 20th century history. I paid the money. I'm entitled. □ Likewise, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in this fic isn't a direct replica of the one

that existed prior to being demolished in 1951.

Also also, pay no attention to how much money is spent in this fic. We're pretending Bucky is wealthy.

See the end of the work for more notes

After the war ends, after John steps off the B-17 that took him across the Atlantic and leaves the airbase behind, after he promises to write Gale (the goodbye catches in his throat like a shard of glass; the promise to stay in touch crowds behind the cage of his clenched teeth like airmen trapped behind barbed wire) and shoulders his musette bag, John turns on his heel and, two days later, finds himself in New York City.

The trip is a blur. He closes his eyes on the bus. He opens them to concrete and taxi cabs.

Clouds of perfume and cologne assault his sinuses; belches of exhaust coat his throat with tar. Shoulders clip shoulders without apology. Eyes glance off eyes, a stone skipping over still water. Standing immobile on the sidewalk, he breathes it all in, lets it grease his tongue and slick down his throat, and tilts his face into the scattered patches of sunlight afforded by the skyscrapers. People push past him, but he doesn't care to move. He's never been to New York before, though it hasn't stopped him from adopting the accent. It trips and rolls off his tongue now as easily as "Roger, wilco," as easily as "Go, Buck!"

It's a phantom ache, the pain in his ribs from the moment the kraut slammed the butt of his rifle into his stomach. The gunshot vibrated in his palm when he shoved the barrel up to save Gale's life, scorched his fingers with the heat of its fire. He knows Gale is alive—John hardly left his side after they reunited on the tarmac of Thorpe Abbotts—but it still feels unreal. Like John might glance over his shoulder and watch Gale disappear over the brick wall, and John will have to suffer months not knowing if he survived the escape back to England. He wasn't able to check for blood, or a body. He simply had to trust that Gale was alive.

But now Gale is gone back to Marge and John is alone in the city that never sleeps.

He entered the war knowing who he is. He's left it unsure, but the first thing he does is check into the fanciest room at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel (he rarely thinks about his bank account these days; it was hardly a worry while he was flying through flak), hook the "Do not disturb" sign on the doorknob, and sleep for a solid sixteen hours.

Then he goes out and gets outrageously drunk. It's the best feeling in the world, flying high with no horizon in sight, fingers numb and lips

loose, a new woman at every bar and nightclub. They take one look at his uniform, the scars he brought home like souvenirs, and hang themselves on his shoulders to listen to every story he has to share. (If most of them feature one Major Buck Cleven, of the soft blond hair and pretty blue eyes, no one seems to notice—or, if they do, care.)

It's easy to lose himself in the thready thrum of the New York City nightlife. Soldiers and sailors and pilots can be found on each street corner. Riding every high he can capture between clenched fists and gritted teeth, John drifts from crowd to crowd—soldiers with foxhole fables; sailors who boast of dragons in the sky and krakens from the deep; pilots who tap dance across every recounting of the Channel, be it in a bomber or a Mustang. If there's a shadow at the edge of his vision, lingering behind him in every crowd, he closes his eyes to it, turns his back to it, drowns it out in cigarette smoke and whiskey, in soft skin under his hands and wet cunts under his mouth.

This is what John is good at: shutting out reality, leaving it behind to make everyone around him feel good so he can ignore that ache in his chest, the hollow that's never filled.

Losing track of time, getting lost in the crowd, is a luxury he never thought to savor until it was gone. In England during the war, even on his nights off, he couldn't let his mind go fuzzy. The men counted on him, looked to him for guidance, fed off his energy and took his reactions as their cue. These Brits are being dicks, so be a dick right back. Curt can't keep up, so slow the planes down. Those German pilots want to split their attack, so ensure they don't.

It was only ever Gale who saw through that façade, who heard John snap at Harding and advised a trip to London. Who saw John recreating baseball games in the empty yard of the stalag and checked in with his head. Who noticed him eyeing up the warning wire and put a staying hand on his shoulder. Who prevented him from getting a bullet to the head (no matter how badly John might have wanted one). Who always got between Bucky and a bad idea.

Without Gale here, John is free to leave sanity behind for greener pastures. Names enter one ear and exit the other. Lipstick-stained cigarettes leave his mouth for a redhead's one minute, a brunette's the next. (He looks at men, their shoulders broad and hands strong, and imagines but doesn't taste, no matter how much he thirsts. Blonds stand out, but none have eyes blue enough to steal his breath like that first moment you break through clouds into the world without end. None have that drawl, that way of looking at John that leaves him

flayed in a good way. None are, simply put, Gale.) His uniform wrinkles under grasping hands and creases beneath stumbling footsteps across hotel carpet. Cash is left each day on his nightstand, the best apology he can offer to the staff cleaning up last night's debauchery. Honesty goes stale on John's tongue; the truth expires between his teeth.

So it's no surprise when he answers the phone while half-asleep, says, "Yeah, send him on up," and promptly drops right back into bed without even registering what he's just agreed to. This woman, the soft give of her stomach bruised by John's teeth, is still asleep in his king-size bed, her head on his spare pillow. A strand of black hair sticks to her bottom lip. John's own skin bears the smudges of her red lipstick. Last night, she'd left lip prints on his nipples, on his ribs, on his hipbones. And while she rode him, she'd rubbed that red into his skin, an ink stain he's far from eager to wash away.

This red, at least, didn't weep from a cut.

The knock on the door wakes her. Bleary-eyed, she glances at John and rasps, "D'you order room service?"

John tries to remember her name and fails, so he only says, "Don't think so," and kisses her before rolling out of bed. The hotel, because the Ritz-Carlton is gorgeous and generous in equal measure, provided him a cream-colored cashmere robe. He found it hanging on the inside of the bathroom door and has hardly worn anything else since. He shrugs into it now and ties the sash in a loose knot around his waist on his way to the door.

With a yawn, he unlocks it and pulls it open, and that yawn becomes a squeak, which becomes a cough, which becomes "Buck?" He squeezes his eyes shut, rubs them with his knuckles, and pries them back open.

Gale is still there in the soft light of the hallway, the leather of his A-3 jacket gleaming and crusher cap angled just-so, toothpick a taunt and temptation both in the corner of his mouth. He's smirking and, if John didn't know better, blushing as he gives John a quick once-over. John looks down at himself. Lipstick is still smeared on his nipples. Clearing his throat, he tugs the robe tighter shut, shielding his chest from Gale's sight.

Blue eyes flick up to his, amusement crystal clear. John feels faint. Perhaps this is how a Victorian felt upon seeing an ankle.

"Hey, Major," Gale says, his familiar drawl like fingernails over John's

skin, scattering goosebumps. John wants to shiver. He abstains. "You're a hard man to find."

The bed rustles inside the room, the woman unearthing herself from the miles-deep duvet. John clears his throat once more and crowds the gap between the door and doorframe, using his bulk to hide the room beyond. He's not sure why, but he doesn't want Gale to see its state. The maids haven't yet been here to clean up his depravity.

"Er," John says, like a poet. "What're you doin' here, Gale?"

Gale arches a brow, either at the use of his first name or the stiffness of John's voice. (Upon reflection, probably both.) "Well, y'see," Gale says, low and deep, and John knows—he *knows*, he knows so thoroughly that he has politely never jerked off to the memory of it, that is how very much he *knows*—Gale doesn't mean for his voice to sound like sex, but it's all John can think of when presented with the war bond poster that is Major Gale W. Cleven dressed to the nines in a lush hotel hallway while John wears nothing but a cashmere bathrobe, last night's fuck still painted on his skin. "I got halfway to Casper and realized I left somethin' important behind."

John swallows. It's loud in the otherwise quiet hallway. How early is it? His room is far removed from the others—he did check into the best money could buy, after all—but it still seems odd to not hear the rumble of suitcases, the low murmur of voices, the rattle of the elevator. Gale tilts his head, and John's gaze glues to his face: the scars on his cheekbones (what might they feel like under his fingertips?), the quirk of his lips (what might they taste like under his mouth?), the shine of his eyes (what might they look like in the lamplight with pupils blown wide?).

"Gonna let me in?" Gale asks.

After a metaphorical dumping of an ice bucket over his head, John nods, then shakes his head, then nods again and holds up one finger. "Er, mind waiting a moment? I'm not…decent."

"Seen you in less than that," Gale says, but steps back all the same.

Face aflame, John says, "One moment," and shuts the door. He very carefully rests his forehead against it—it wouldn't do to let Gale hear the thump he'd like to give his head—and exhales, long and slow. This is somehow the worst and best day of his life, and he's not even sure the sun has risen yet.

“Bucky?”

He jerks away from the door, whipping around to find the woman—does her name start with a K? Katherine, maybe? Or Karol? Or perhaps it’s Carol with a C—wearing just his unbuttoned olive-green uniform shirt. Were Gale not standing outside the door, John might be ready for a second round thanks to the sight of her alone. But Gale *is* here, so John brushes his curls off his forehead and smiles.

Five minutes later, and by some miracle, the woman—maybe her name is Cassidy?—doesn’t slap him as he unceremoniously herds her toward the door with cab fare in hand. But when John opens it for her and finds Gale leaning against the gilded and filigreed wall opposite the door, legs crossed at the ankle, head tipped back while he tongues the tip of the toothpick in his mouth, she looks at John with raised brows. He hopes his face isn’t as red as it feels. (After all, before he fucked her, she fucked him. She now knows his appetites, and her welcome of them made him wonder if perhaps she, too, is queer. It’s a pleasant thought. But while she got dressed in the bathroom and after he threw on skivvies and a tank top, he hid the dildo and tin of Crisco in the nightstand drawer.)

“Major,” she says to John. He’s not sure if he’s imagining the teasing lilt to her tone. Then she looks at Gale, that knowing smile on her lips, and says, “Major.”

“Ma’am,” Gale says, nudging the brim of his cap with one knuckle. Is this what a stroke feels like?

Then she’s gone, and takes all the oxygen with her. Gale watches her go and John watches Gale, though his face gives nothing away. How much time has passed is actually a mystery, but Gale doesn’t look that changed. Certainly still tired, the bags under his eyes dark, but not quite so on-edge, like he’s sure every shadow hides a kraut with a gun.

Without warning, Gale looks back at John, and the gleam of those blue eyes hits John in the solar plexus. He’s known from the moment he learned Gale was shot down—Red’s voice in John’s ear, reluctance and sorrow, anger and empathy dripping off every static-scratched word: “He went down swinging”—that he’s in love with him. Well, perhaps he suspected before then, but that was the moment he *knew*. The sky is his paradise, cigarettes taste better after good sex, he loves Gale Cleven like the sea loves a horizon: the edge of the world won’t keep them apart; they will always meet where it ends. That love has been like shellshock keeping him awake at night, a weight he needs to

leave behind where it belongs in the war. Let the impossible go up in flames, become a memory to reminisce upon in his golden years. It's certainly what he's attempted to do by fucking his way through New York, hoping each kiss would finally be the one that allows him to move on.

And it might have worked, had Gale not shown up. (John is adept at lying to himself.)

"Pretty girl," Gale says, and he sounds amused, like this is nothing unusual. John is relieved at the same time he isn't, but he knows that's unreasonable.

"Come on in," he says. "Sorry about the mess."

With a smirk, Gale pushes off the wall, hips first, and doesn't appear to notice the fact John briefly swallows his own tongue. "You forgotten I used to room with you, Bucky?" he muses as he crosses the threshold. John can't resist an inhale: peppermint gum, musky cologne, something deeper that's just pure Gale. It settles in his chest, warm as a summer breeze. Like the moment John heard Gale's voice crackle over the radio, asking the Tower for landing instructions.

"*Chowhound One, you are clear for overhead approach*."

"Course not," John says and lingers by the door after he shuts it, watching Gale take in the room, large and airy, gilded with thread and leaf and gleaming with shiny mahogany. John's Class A coat is tossed upon the chair at the vanity, his tie over the vanity mirror, his trousers hooked around the vanity's leg. Their eyes meet briefly in the mirror, a flash of blue, a curve of pink lips, and then Gale is moving on and John tries to breathe. Gale bends to smell the flowers on the desk, pokes his head into the lush marble bathroom, pinches the heavy drapes between thumb and forefinger to peer outside.

"Celebrating the war's end, Bucky?" Gale asks, soft, his back to John. He hasn't set down his duffel bag, like he's not yet sure of his welcome. John wants to take it, fold Gale's trousers into drawers beside his own, hang their shirts in the closet. He wants to be the one to always loop Gale's tie around his neck, ensure the knot is straight. (Sometimes, when John was rotting in the stalag and claiming Gale's bunk as his own to bury his face in the pillow, he'd imagine living with Gale in some little house somewhere. He'd wait for Gale to come home at the end of the day, greet him at the door like a wife does a husband, take his hat and coat, murmur, "Dinner's almost ready," and

kiss his cheek. Were John a woman, he'd marry Gale, take his last name or give him his own, *'til death do us part*. But he isn't, and so here they are.)

"Something like that," John says and pushes away from the door, though he's not quite sure what to do with his hands. "You said you left somethin' behind?"

"Mm."

"I can look in my pack, though I'm fairly sure nothing's yours in there. Maybe you left it with one of the fellas?"

A flick of the lock on the balcony door is the only reply he gets. "You got a balcony?"

"Yeah." John scratches the back of his neck. "Haven't used it yet, but __"

Gale opens the door and the city crowds in: honking horns, clamoring voices, gasoline and smoke, sweat and exhaustion. In a way, it feels like the war never happened. Gale, standing on the balcony in his A-3 jacket and crusher cap, looks like something stolen out of time. The world has moved on without them. John doesn't know how to catch up, or if he even wants to.

Avoiding the mirror, John strides for the balcony door and pokes his head outside. "I'm gonna shower real quick. You wanna get breakfast after?"

"It's nearly lunchtime," Gale says without turning.

"Fine, then get lunch. I know this great delicatessen."

Gale tilts his head back, and if John angles his, he can see the sweep of Gale's eyelashes against his cheekbones. The sun isn't especially bright, but after the rain of England, perhaps the muggy June of New York is a reprieve. For a moment, John allows himself to imagine stepping out onto the balcony, wrapping his arms around Gale from behind, burying his face in the curve of Gale's neck. He'd make a home of the dip of his collarbone. Were this world at all welcoming to queers, were it safe for John to want who he wants and not have to hide it, he could do it right here, in broad daylight, for everyone to see.

It feels almost unfair they fought a war for a better world, and yet

some things have stayed the same. Maybe Gale agrees. Maybe that's why he's here.

"Lunch sounds good," Gale says at last.

John nods. "Make yourself at home, Buck." Then he ducks back inside and washes away every maybe, what-if, and could-have-been. He knows better than to hope.

# # #

Forty-Three Feral Hogs is hardly what you'd call fine dining, but John was hungover his third day in the city, wandering in search of something greasy, and found himself laughing at the name. The glass-front delicatessen is tucked out of sight, at the end of a narrow alleyway you have to brave for all the shadows and stray cats, but it's rarely empty. It seems almost an unspoken secret of the New York regulars, and though John is hardly one, he likes to pretend. (Why else would he have adopted the accent?)

Gale eyes the delicatessen dubiously as they approach, but John says, "Trust me," and holds the door open, waving him in with a small bow. The dark grey walls are decorated with, presumably, forty-three fat and pink carved pigs, illuminated overhead by dim bulbs in slow rotating ceiling fans. A few people sit at the tables along one wall and two stools are taken at the counter, with the bread display the brightest spot in the entire delicatessen. In their A-3s, John and Gale stand out, but one thing John has learned since arriving in New York City is that most people won't notice if you take a dump right there on the sidewalk. If you reacted to every weird thing happening around you, you'd never get anything done.

"Find a seat," John says, nudging Gale's arm. "I'll order for you."

Gale snorts, removing his cap and running his fingers through his hair. "Think I can't do it on my own?"

John just rolls his eyes and gives him a shove, parting ways as he approaches the bread display. He's been here a few times since that very first hungover lunch, so while he waits to order, he leans against the display and scans the quiet delicatessen. Gale has taken a seat on a stool toward the end of the counter. An elderly couple at a nearby table both stare at him, talking behind cupped hands, though Gale pretends not to notice as he flicks through the menu tucked beside the napkin dispenser. No matter the uniform, it still feels strange to see Gale outside wartime, like if John peered out the window, he'd find

sandbag barricades and bombed buildings.

This time between war and peace feels almost liminal. John isn't sure which way to lean, which is the right way to go, how to put one foot in front of the other toward a new state of being, to a new normal. Life was put on hold while he prepared to fight, and became background noise while flying across the Channel, and transitioned into some sort of unattainable dream while a prisoner of war. He had no one waiting for him back in the States. Not the way Gale did. For John, there were no women boarding ships to follow their new husbands to a new home, babies on the way or balanced on hips.

It's why he came to New York, to lose himself in the crowds. Gale being here has made his efforts grind to a halt, and yet he can't find it in himself to begrudge the company. Gale is his compass, more than any little instrument of metal.

"Here we are," John announces as he approaches, plates in hand.

Without looking up from the menu's little biography about the Feral Hogs' owners, Gale hooks his foot around one leg of the stool John aims for and drags it closer. John takes it in stride, settling beside him close enough their shoulders touch. The toothpick is back in the corner of Gale's mouth. The light catches the shine of his tongue as he prods the toothpick's tip.

"The owner know you fought?" Gale asks.

John looks away, unfolding his napkin over his thigh, and sniffs, loud. "Probably. Come in here with my hat on, don't I?" Belatedly, he takes his off, setting it onto the counter beside Gale's.

Gale nods and returns the menu to its holder. "His family's German."

"Mmhmm." John picks up one half of the Reuben on rye and takes a bite, jaw popping. Gale glances at him wearing that same grin he gave him in the bar in London, and John is tempted to squeeze his cheeks now just as he had then. He refrains. They're not surrounded by their men here, and that elderly couple is still watching them.

"Take a bite 'fore it gets cold," John says after swallowing.

Corners of his eyes crinkled, Gale finally looks away and sets his toothpick onto his plate. For several long minutes, they simply eat in silence, shoulders brushing, elbows knocking, knees colliding. It's familiar and it's not, and John likes the normalcy at the same time he

wants to break it, wants to change it. He wants to take Gale by the lapels and shake loose the answers as to why he came here, why he found John, why he didn't continue on back to Marge. But this delicatessen is too quiet for a conversation like that, so John lets it lie. And in any case, Gale is usually one to only talk when he wants to. John has grown used to waiting.

"What else you been up to, aside from findin' delicatessens?" Gale asks at last while eating John's pickle spear, forearms resting on the edge of the counter. The elderly couple have finally gone and been replaced by a trio of women. John nodded when they smiled his way, but he's content to ignore them.

John swallows his last bite and wishes he had more to fill his mouth. "Uh…lots."

Gale raises a brow. "What, is it a secret?"

"No, it's just…" John wipes his lips with his napkin to buy himself a moment, and then decides *to hell with it*. "Not actually sure how long I've been here, so it's all kinda…blurred."

Taking another bite of his pickle, Gale eyes him like he can see right through him. John knows from experience that he can, so he looks down at his crumb-covered plate. There's no telling what Gale might find if he looks for too long. If he pokes just right, all the yearning might spill out, and then John would have to suffer losing his best friend in a way far more permanent than the end of a war.

"Dunno for sure," Gale says at last, "since I'm not really sure when you got here, but I think s'been about ten days. Maybe eleven."

John tries a smirk on for size. "Couldn't go two weeks without me, huh?"

Gale finishes the pickle spear and wipes his hands on his napkin. John wishes he could suck the words back out of the air. "Told you I got halfway to Casper," Gale says as he fishes a stick of gum out of his pocket. He offers one to John. John accepts, though not because he wants one (Gale ate John's pickle spear, after all) but because he needs something to bite down on.

This is what Gale's mouth tastes like. He shoves the thought away.

"And then turned right back around?" John asks, crumpling the wrapper.

“After calling Marge, yeah.” Gale glances at the door when the bell jingles, allowing another two men in. They doff their hats, nod at the three women, and approach the bread display side by side. John finds himself looking for things that aren’t there: do their shoulders nudge? Do their hands bump? He doesn’t want to be alone in this ache, in the hunger for a touch he cannot have—not in public, not in private. Not ever. It was easier to ignore when he had a war to focus on. Here, in peacetime, there’s nothing to distract.

“Thought you were in a rush to get married,” John says, watching Gale smooth the gum wrapper between his thumbs, wiping away wrinkles.

Gale looks up at him through his eyelashes. There’s something in his gaze, but John can’t read it. He certainly doesn’t allow himself to try. Instead, he looks away, blows a bubble with his gum, winces at the crack of its popping. The two men look up, wide-eyed. Maybe they fought in the war, too. Maybe they’re also trapped in this liminal space that John can’t escape.

“Let’s play tourist,” Gale says abruptly and stands up.

John frowns at him. “Why?”

“Because we’re in New York City, Bucky.” Gale grins at him, tongue poking his bubblegum like he’s about to blow a bubble. John stares, imagines parting his thighs and pulling Gale close between them, imagines kissing that smirk right off his mouth. Gale’s mouth would taste *pink*—bubblegum pink, pink of a tongue, the flushed pink of his lips.

John looks away, dons his cap, leads the way out of Forty-Three Feral Hogs. It’s with a dawning sort of dread that he knows, no matter how many people he kisses, he’s never getting over Buck.

# # #

They play the tourist: Times Square, Yankee Stadium, the Statue of Liberty. (John was somewhat surprised Gale suggested Yankee Stadium, given his general lack of interest in all things baseball, but every time John could bear to tear his eyes away, Gale was just smiling at him. It occurs to John, later, that Gale simply wanted to watch John enjoy himself. He’s not quite sure what to make of that, so he adds it to the list of things he’s ignoring. At the very top of his list are Gale’s forearms, exposed because he’s rolled up his shirtsleeves.) As the sun sets, they’re wandering down crowded streets shattered

with golden light, eating hotdogs, when John realizes he's lost track of where they are.

"I think my hotel's that way," John says, pointing over his shoulder.

Gale nods, sucking a drop of mustard off his thumb. John blames heat stroke for the sudden desire to become that drop of mustard. "Mm, but I have somewhere else in mind."

"How? You've never been here before."

"How d'you think I found you, Bucky?" he asks, though not like he's particularly interested in John's answer.

John answers anyway, balling up the foil of his hotdog wrapper and chucking it into the nearest trashcan. "By tapping your heels together and saying, 'There's no place like home.'"

"Near enough." Gale grins, like there's a double meaning to his words. John pointedly ignores it. "I know you pretty well, so all I had to do is think, 'Where would John Egan go?' and then ask enough people at enough nightclubs until someone knew you were stayin' at the Ritz."

John snorts. "Sounds foolproof."

"Hey, it worked, didn't it?"

"No, suppose I can't argue with the results. But that still doesn't explain how you have somewhere in mind to go."

"Where's your sense of adventure, Bucky?" Gale knocks their shoulders together and reaches into the inside pocket of his A-3, unearthing a crumpled napkin. When he unfolds it, John can just make out handwriting in ink, though not clearly enough to read it. Gale glances from it to the nearest street sign before nudging John to cross the road. "Besides, when have I ever led you astray, hmm?"

"Fine, fine." John raises his hands in surrender. "Lead on, Major."

As night falls, the atmosphere changes with the ages of the people they pass, and the deeper they walk into the summer-full city, the deeper goes the mood. Rationing is still in place so close to the war's end, but people make do: dark makeup and short skirts, zoot-suits and slicked-back hair. More than a few people wear uniforms, though the ease with which they wear them changes. They're not buttoned-up and pin-collared, and John takes their unspoken advice and loosens

up, angling his cap, freeing his collar from its tie, rolling up his shirtsleeves. It's still warm enough at night to not require much in the way of layers, a marked difference from England and Germany.

Although he's fucked his way through the more popular clubs in the ten or eleven days he's been here, he doesn't recognize this street: the gleam of neon lights blotting out stars, music pouring out of every open door, cigarettes and whiskey ripening the air. So it's almost a surprise when Gale takes John's arm and leads him down a dark alleyway, past dumpsters and castles of wooden crates, to a nondescript back door. John side-eyes Gale, but Gale just says, "Trust me," and knocks a pattern on the door.

"What are you, part of the SOE?" John murmurs into his ear.

Gale nudges his elbow into John's chest. A letterbox slot on the door slides open at eyelevel, and a pair of dark brown eyes peers out at them both. When they land on Gale, they widen.

"Buck!" says the person right before the slot slides closed.

John glances at Gale askance, but he doesn't have time to ask before a clatter of locks open and the door swings inward, revealing a dark-skinned woman in a Red Cross uniform. She smiles, teeth bright and white, and waves them in.

"For anyone else I'd ask a password," she says, her accent more New York than John's could ever hope to be. Her voice is also remarkably deep for a dame. "But for you I won't bother."

"Angie," Gale says, "this is Bucky."

That smile turns on him, lights him up from the toes. "The one and only. Your friend had a *lot* to say about you last night before we found Hannah."

"All vicious lies and slander," John says and raises a brow at Gale.

"Hannah pointed me to the Ritz-Carlton," Gale says.

"Right." While Gale and Angie chat, John fetches a cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket, feeling awkward. The name Hannah is vaguely familiar, but he wouldn't be able to pick her out of a lineup. The most he bothered with was making sure the women had a good time while he got them off, and then gave them cab fare to go home in the morning.

“Come on,” Gale says and leads John deeper into the dank hallway, lit only intermittently as John flicks his stubborn lighter. At another door, Angie knocks in a pattern, and yet another letterbox slot slides open. Jazz music pours out, flooding the hallway. At a signal from Angie, the letterbox slot closes and the music goes with it, only to reappear as the door swings open to reveal a smoky staircase leading deep underground. Neon lights boasting the name Moonlight perch on the wall above the landing down below.

John glances at Gale, flame flickering on his lighter.

Gale just smirks. “After you, Bucky.”

“Have a good time, boys!” Angie says with a squeeze to John’s shoulder—when he glances at her, she gives him a knowing look, brows raised—before she disappears back up the hall to guard the outer door.

“You comin’ or not?” says the person holding the door open, their zoot-suit oversized, their eyeliner bright purple.

John swallows. Gale rolls his eyes, hooks their arms together, and hauls him inside. “You need to relax, Bucky!” he shouts into his ear as the music engulfs them.

John plucks the unlit cigarette out of his mouth and shouts back, “Where exactly have you brought me, Buck?”

“Upstairs is for straights!” Gale says as they reach the landing and the nightclub pours away from them, men and women of all ages and ethnicities as far as the eye can see. Men dance with men, women dance with women, people whose gender John can’t identify dance with both and more. A large woman stands on a stage before a jazz band, serenading a microphone. If John paid attention, he’d recognize the song, but Gale leans close to his ear again, the scent of his aftershave more intoxicating than the pounding of feet over hardwood floor, his heart beating in time. “Down here’s for the queers!”

Before John can even be sure he’s heard Gale right, Gale shoves him into the room and steals his jacket away, hooking it over his own shoulder. John reaches back, latching onto Gale’s free hand so they don’t lose sight of each other, and lets the music pull him in. He has no idea why Gale has brought him here—no idea that Gale even knew what a queer is, let alone where to find an entire nightclub of them; and not only that, but that John wouldn’t recoil at the idea of rubbing elbows with them—but if there’s one thing John likes to do, it’s dance.

Gale waves him off as soon as they've found the bar, and while John is reluctant to leave him, he can't help but catch the hand of the first woman to reach for him. It's all sweat and smoke and skin as they dance, as John sings along, as he jitterbugs with a woman one minute and a man the next, returning to the bar between every other song to check on Gale. Gale braces for impact each time so John can sling an arm over his shoulders and steal a sip of whatever drink Gale ordered for him—they're sparkly, or purple, or both. Each time he dives back into the crush of bodies, he worries about leaving Gale behind, but Gale just watches him go with a grin, toothpick in the corner of his mouth, elbows propped on the bar as he nurses a ginger beer.

In the early days of their friendship, John used to consider Gale's preference to sit on the sidelines a bit sad—where was the fun in merely watching? It was why he'd tried to drag him out to every club he could find, but it didn't take long to realize Gale's idea of fun was watching the people he cared for do what made them happy: Marge working the jukebox; John singing *Blue Skies* into a microphone; Curt easily knocking a Brit out with a single hit. It makes little sense to John, but who is he to begrudge Gale that?

He's on his return to the bar when he reels to a halt so abruptly a dancing couple has to part around him like some kind of do-si-do. A sailor leans against the bar, one elbow propped atop it, chin on his fist, and yaps into Gale's ear, who sips his ginger beer with an ease bordering on lackadaisical. John is familiar with Gale's amusement over anyone yapping at him (John sees it often enough), so he knows Gale isn't annoyed that this sailor has taken John's spot by his side. Ordinarily, John might overlook it.

But here, they're surrounded by queers.

Feeling the kind of buzzed only surviving a flak storm can inspire, John rocks up to Gale, flinging an arm around his shoulders and leaning in deep enough the sailor has no choice but to back off lest they crash noses. "Ah, sorry, buddy!" John crows far louder than the noise of the club requires, but he's not above annoying someone away. "Didn't see you there!"

The sailor purses his lips at John. He's pretty enough, but John is quite literally hanging off of Gale. No one could ever compare.

"We were talking," says the sailor.

"I can see that, pal," John says, tilting back to look at Gale's face. "He

botherin' you?"

Gale's lips twitch. "Not really."

"If you wouldn't mind—"

"I would actually, *sport*," John says, popping his lips on the P, clacking his teeth on the T. "Gale, you promised me a dance."

"I did no such thing," Gale says, even as one of his hands finds John's waist. John is a sweaty mess, but if Gale is bothered by the way his shirt clings to his skin, he doesn't let on.

"His name is Buck," says the sailor, still far too close to Gale for John's liking. Does John need to lick Gale to declare him his? He would.

"It sure is," John agrees, nudging his hip up against Gale. Given Gale is still leaning back against the bar, this puts John's hip in the region of Gale's crotch, but it makes Gale's hand flatten on John's back, so he doesn't pull away. "And you know why?"

The sailor scoffs. "Why—"

"'Cause mine's *Bucky*," John says and whisks Gale away.

"John," Gale says, even as he lets John tug him into the throng of bodies, "I don't dance."

"You do tonight!" John says, twirls Gale into his arms, and adds, "Follow my lead!"

Time blurs, goes gauzy like film going bad, with Gale in John's arms. Gale has two left feet, but John doesn't let that dissuade him, twirling and twisting him, colliding with people and being collided with in return, and when Gale finally frees his smile, John feels like he could fly. He forgets where they are, who's waiting for them back home, why this is a bad idea, and steals Gale's toothpick before twirling him away at a high note from the singer on stage.

At its end, he reels Gale in and kisses him. Gale stiffens, but in the seconds that it takes John's Buck-drunk mind to realize he probably should have asked—or, better yet, not kissed his best friend at all—Gale kisses back.

Jubilant, John laughs, and Gale laughs, too, pulling back just far enough to look up at him. There's a question on his face, one John

doesn't have the words to answer—for all that he loves talking, yapping is more his forte. But one of his hands is still laced with Gale's behind his back, so he brings his free one up to palm Gale's cheek, and Gale's eyes drop to John's mouth, so he tilts Gale's lips up into his once more. Gale goes, easy and willing. He tastes of ginger beer, spicy-sweet, and though John has never imbibed (at least, not where Gale can see him savoring each sip, imagining he's tasting it on Gale's tongue rather than simply drinking it from a glass), the taste is somehow familiar. Or perhaps he's simply spent so long imagining this that he can't help but find familiarity in the unfamiliar.

Whatever the case, it's a sheer fucking thrill—a goddamn barrel roll, like buzzing the tower—to kiss Gale around other people. They're as safe as is physically possible for queers in public, but they're still in the middle of a dance floor, bodies gyrating all around them, instruments crashing and voices soaring. (*You survived the war*, the energy seems to sing. *Spend your body wisely*.) His heart races, frantic, as Gale slings his free arm around John's neck and tilts his head, changes the angle, takes control, and John gives it, happy to follow Gale's lead (when is he not?). Once Gale puts his mind to something, his focus can't be broken. It used to be that only applied to aviation, to physics, to cooking a cat to edibility in a dented metal pot.

It now applies to John.

Gale's thumb finds the corner of John's mouth, brushes it, then tugs at it, and John's lips slip open for Gale's tongue, a bold slide that has John's knees trembling. He clings to Gale, since he's not about to collapse in this mess of feet, and kisses back with every ounce of pent-up frustration—every scrap of need, of want, of love—he has tried to lose in the bodies of nameless women. He should have known that soft curves could never compare to the solid plane that is Gale's chest, the lean lines of his legs, the wiry strength of his arms as his hands find their way to John's waist and walk him backward. The kiss breaks but their lips still brush, breaths shared like shotgunning a cigarette. Gale's eyes are heavy-lidded as he looks at John, the two inches of height John has on him nothing in the face of Gale's hunger.

He had no idea Gale was starving. No idea their appetites might match.

His back hits a wall, and he grins, tipping forward to kiss Gale again, and Gale bites into the kiss, teeth sharp on John's bottom lip. It doesn't take any time at all to learn the give of Gale's lips, the wet of his tongue, to learn he likes to be coaxed into something deeper, a

tease becoming a press becoming undiluted thirst. He knows Gale better than he knows anyone else on the fucking planet. It's no surprise that translates here, too.

"Come on," Gale gasps, hands clutching the front of John's uniform shirt.

"Why?" John asks.

"'Cause what I wanna do to you is better in private," Gale says and frees himself from John's grip before John can even process what he's heard. He follows Gale anyway, and loses himself somewhere between the wall and the bar (where Gale finds their A-3s and caps), and the bar to the street (where Gale has to slap John's hands away from his ass), and the street to a cab (where John remembers to act like he's not sporting a semi), and the cab to the hotel elevator (where John and Gale nod polite hellos to the operator and keep to neutral corners).

He doesn't find himself again until Gale unlocks John's hotel room for him (John didn't even notice him stealing the key from his pocket), waves him in first, and shuts the door, then reels John back against it by the loosened collar of his shirt. John hits it with a thud, breath kicked out of him, but he grins, easy and loose, while Gale drops their jackets and caps to the floor.

"Where d'you think you're goin'?" Gale mutters and presses himself up against John's front. John groans in relief when Gale kisses him, feeling like the jazz music still plays in his bones as he learns the way Gale kisses when they're in private, deep and heated but almost shy, like he's trembling in the face of his own desire. There are still too many layers between them, but Gale doesn't seem any more eager to move away from the door than John is as they slow down and savor. It's the opposite of their mad make out in the club and mad dash through the city, but if this is the only night John will have him—if this is some shared fever dream, giving him everything he's ever wanted—he intends to make the most of it all.

And besides, he's never had such uninterrupted time to simply be alone with Gale, and certainly not the freedom to learn how he likes to kiss and be kissed, what each angle and slide can make him do: hands grasping, lips bruising, tongues licking, teeth biting. For the first time, they have nothing to do and nowhere to be. There's no one to hide from, no one to fool, no one to convince. It's as much a relief as the kisses themselves.

With John's bottom lip caught between his teeth, Gale finally slides his hands around to unbutton John's shirt. John helps him, rolling his shoulders to shrug it off, and smiles when Gale tosses it blindly away. John returns the favor, though his hands shake as he frees each button, baring pale skin inch by inch. He'd had a hell of a time pretending not to notice it in Algeria, Gale stretched out in the sun, skin burning where it wasn't golden. It was why John had donned his sunglasses; if no one could see his eyes while he slouched in the shade, no one had to know he watched Gale unabashedly, committing the color of Gale's nipples to memory. (He's delighted to learn they're the same shade of pink as his lips.)

When John struggles to free a particularly stubborn button, Gale laughs and brushes John's curls off his forehead, then drops a kiss there. "You just had to wear layers," John mutters, voice a rasp. "I mean, yeah, same layers as mine, but yours are *touchy*."

"It's like unwrappin' a present."

"My birthday's in September."

"Stop whinin' about your gift, Bucky," Gale says, tilts John's head up with a finger hooked under his chin, and kisses him softly. John sighs, and Gale's shirt falls to their feet.

He's wanted this for years: to map Gale's bare shoulders, to trace over his collarbone, to circle his nipples with his thumbs, to play over Gale's ribs like a xylophone. He hums a different note with each trip over each rib, and Gale laughs, like this is some inside joke rather than John's want and his need and his goddamned yearning for what he cannot have finally catching up with him, making him go goofy. But the instant he meets Gale's eyes, the world goes quiet and calm. There's nothing to fear here. John can breathe.

They know one another better than anything, no matter that this is the first time they've ever breached the gap like this. He knows every inflection of Gale's voice, each twitch of his expression, what the angle of his shoulders implies, what the stiffness of his jaw means he needs. They could read one another's minds while planes apart, in different squadrons entirely.

What might sex be like with him? John is used to learning bodies in the short term, storing the knowledge until the woman is out of sight. He knows the generalities well, but the details rarely linger. There's never been a reason to hoard them. Now, no matter how much it

might hurt when he no longer has a reason to know what makes Gale shudder and moan, he will keep each scrap of knowledge.

They say you never forget your first, so John drinks Gale in, committing every last detail to memory, no matter how small. If someone carved him open, they'd find Gale etched into each and every fiber of his being. Gale's permanent in him, a wound that will never scar, a bruise that will never fade. Forever won't ever be long enough.

It's far too late to turn back, but he wouldn't, even if he could.

"What do you want?" John asks, voice softer than he meant it to be.

"What're you offering?" Gale asks, voice equally soft.

"Anything. We can go slow, go fast, don't matter. I just—I want to make you feel good. Tell me what you want, and I'll do it." He wants to be remembered, too.

Gale cocks his head, and in the darkness of the hotel room, everything feels closer, more intimate, as John inhales, as Gale exhales. He props his elbow on John's shoulder, cards long fingers through John's hair, and dips his gaze to John's…crotch? His feet?

"You know," Gale says, "you are…very big."

John snorts. "You ain't even seen me naked yet, Buck."

"I meant—" Gale stammers and scoffs, and John doesn't need to see him to know he's gone red. "Well, I'll take your word for it there, but I meant your…everything. Your shoulders block out the sun. Your hips are fucking solid—doubt even a bull could make you move if you don't want to. And your thighs…?"

"Ahh," John says and looks down, though he's still wearing his trousers. He hasn't gained back all the weight he lost while a prisoner of war, but the cooks at Thorpe Abbotts made sure to feed every newly freed airman as much as the doctors would allow.

"So if anything is on the table…"

"It is," John agrees.

"Then I want you to fuck my mouth."

John chokes on his next inhale. Gale slaps at his back, which just

makes it worse, but John can't gather the breath to tell him that.

"What, did I say it wrong?" Gale asks, though his amusement is audible.

John shakes his head, clinging to Gale's shoulders like they're all that keep him from falling to his knees (because they are). "Nah," he says when he can finally speak again, "just never expected to hear those words come out of your mouth in that order before. Never even knew you wanted me like this, that you'd—that you'd looked at *me*, and had *ideas*."

"Then you haven't been paying attention, Major," Gale says.

It's easy to dip his head and catch Gale's mouth again. When words won't suffice, let actions speak. He pushes away from the door and Gale's arms wrap around him, as if he's happy to be led—and doesn't seem at all surprised when the backs of his thighs meet the foot of the bed. It's been neatly made, corners creased, with a piece of chocolate placed on each pillow.

"Boys could've learned somethin' from the maids," Gale says and sits on the bed, bouncing as if to test its give. "'stead'a you havin' to scold them for not creasing their corners."

John snorts, opening his belt buckle and popping the button of his trousers, but pauses when a sound strangles in the back of Gale's throat. He looks up to find Gale slouched back on his elbows, wide eyes glued to John's hands.

"All right?" John asks.

"Just enjoyin' the show," Gale says. "Better than *Wizard of Oz*."

They'd watched it with the boys one day on the base, every airman crammed into the dark theatre, and in the end had a running commentary over whether a broomstick or a bomber would better scare the Germans. A few of the guys wanted to paint their faces green for a raid. (Jack said a firm "No" and it was never brought up again.) "Toto," John says in his best Dorothy voice, "I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore," and lets his trousers drop. He kicks them away so he stands in nothing but his skivvies, his erection obvious, and smiles when Gale sits back upright to slide one hand across John's left thigh like he's trying to guess the circumference.

"Mmhmm," Gale says, cheeks darkening at whatever he's thinking as

he brings his other hand to the same thigh, attempting to make his fingers touch. John isn't surprised they don't. Gale looks like he might have an aneurysm about it.

"Let me get the light," John says, since he wants to properly see Gale, and steps away to turn on the lamp on the nightstand and the desk. When he turns back, his mouth goes dry at the sight of Gale now bare as the day he was born, head on a pillow and one knee splayed to the side as he unwraps a piece of chocolate. John must make a sound, since Gale glances up right as he bites into it. John's not sure what to look at: Gale's lips around that candy, the long lines of his body, or the proud curve of his cock. It seems unfair he can't take in all at once.

"Want a taste?" Gale asks, and when John just dumbly nods, he holds out the remaining half of the chocolate. John makes to step around the side of the bed, but Gale tsks and says, "Now, now, you know where I want you, but take those off first. No gettin' on the bed still dressed."

"Jesus Christ," John breathes and kicks off his skivvies, stroking his cock just once to take the edge off. Gale's swallow is audible, his tongue running over his teeth. John presses one knee onto the bed, frowns at the way the duvet billows up around them like a parachute, and says, "Hold on," before yanking the duvet down to a pile on the floor. He won't have anything, not even this Egyptian cotton, getting between him and Gale's skin.

Then he climbs up onto the bed and wishes for the first time it wasn't so big since it's hardly sexy having to knee up the soft mattress just to reach Gale. But he manages it without once faceplanting—Gale snorts; John rolls his eyes—and happily covers Gale's body with his. The first slide of bare skin to skin is like touching an exposed wire, the spark white-hot, and perhaps Gale feels it, too. He sucks in a trembling breath like he does, pupils blown wide as he welcomes the weight of John's body with parting thighs. John opens his mouth. Gale drops the chocolate onto his tongue, then nudges John's mouth shut. John chews, holding Gale's eyes with a smirk, and swallows, and then Gale takes John's face in both hands and pulls him into a kiss. It starts open-mouthed and filthy, all tongue and teeth and chocolate, and doesn't relent.

After that sojourn by the door, after every kiss in the Moonlight nightclub, John knows what Gale likes, and it seems Gale knows him, too. This time, though, each kiss is paired with hands mapping flesh,

their cocks lining up as John grinds down against him. Knees bent to frame John in, Gale meets every roll of John's hips, smearing precome between them. He evidently has a bit of chest hair—it's as blond as the mop on his head, so John didn't notice before, not when he had so much else to take in—and the scratch of it against his nipples makes him gasp, makes him press harder in search of more. He's a starving man set before a feast, knowing there will come an end but thankful for every bite to get there.

Unceremoniously, Gale grabs hold of John's ass, gripping tight as the cool air of the hotel room meets John's heated skin, and John has to break the kiss to pant into Gale's shoulder. (Fuck, he wishes he could bite a mark there, a bruise to remember him by.) Gale noses John's cheek, then his chin, until he gets to John's neck, and the kiss pressed there is soft, almost sweet in the face of such debauchery, and rather unmaking. Then Gale hauls John up in counterpoint to the drag of his teeth down to John's chest, where he sucks a hickey on the curve of John's tit—right where, if John remembers correctly, there was a lipstick smudge this morning.

"You're fuckin' deranged, Buck," John breathes, aware he's trembling but unable to stop.

"Makin' sure you remember this, Bucky," Gale says and licks a stripe right over the bite.

John could come from that alone. But that isn't what Gale asked for, and while there are many things you could call John, an inconsiderate lay isn't one of them, so he gathers every scattered shred of his wits and pushes up into a plank, hands flat to the mattress on either side of Gale's waist. Gale grins up at him, lazy as the cat that got the cream as his hands knead John's ass. Narrowing his eyes, John grabs another pillow (the chocolate goes flying across the room) to tuck it under Gale's head with no small amount of care. He's determined to wipe that look off Gale's face, but he's not going to be a dick about it.

"I have a rubber," John says when Gale looks comfortable. "If you want me to wear one."

Gale shakes his head. "Not unless you want to."

Exhaling slow, John says, "No," and shifts to straddle Gale's chest, smirking when Gale immediately reaches for his thighs. John gently covers his hands and says, "If you want me to stop, let go of them, yeah? Figure that's the only reason you would."

Gale nods. “Never done this before, so it might not—”

John squeezes Gale’s hands and lets go. “I’ll show you.” He very purposefully doesn’t say, “*It’ll be good because it’s you*.” It would give away far more than he’s willing to show.

“Do you want me to come?” Gale asks.

“Could you from this?”

“I have no idea.” His gaze drops to John’s cock when a bead of precome follows the vein down to John’s pubes. His swallow is audible. “Maybe.”

“Well, come if you want, but I plan to eat you out after this, so.”

Gale’s right hand drops away from John’s thigh, and when John looks over his shoulder, he finds Gale’s wrapped his fingers tight around the base of his prick. It’s been a while since John has had sex with someone this responsive. He’s not sure if that’s because Gale hasn’t fucked that many people, or because of how turned on he is. Either way, it’s flattering.

“I’m realizin’,” Gale says when he returns his clammy hand to John’s thigh, “I might have wanted you a lot longer than I was aware.”

“Oh yeah?” John can’t help but smile. “When’d you realize?”

“Halfway to Casper,” Gale says, like it’s obvious. “Around the same time that I realized I left somethin’ important behind.”

“Oh.” John nods, and then pauses and blinks. “Wait, was that me?”

Gale laughs. “Took you long enough, John.”

Now it’s John’s turn to wrap one hand around the base of his cock, to clutch the headboard with the other and try to remind his lungs they’re capable of holding air. When he opens his eyes, Gale is smirking up at him, so John raises his brows and Gale nods. John guides his cock to Gale’s mouth. The first touch of wet heat, Gale’s tongue swirling around John’s cockhead, has him dropping his head to hang between his shoulders, grasping the headboard with both hands now. Gale hums in what sounds like pleasure, so John recites *Blue Skies* in his head, which doesn’t help because all he can think of is Gale, so he hums *The Star-Spangled Banner* until he’s got himself back under control. Gale snorts but, thankfully, doesn’t join in.

When John no longer feels like he's about to come, he opens his eyes to find Gale watching him. He raises his brows, as if to convey he's ready, so John slides a bit deeper, then a bit deeper, and a bit deeper, and discovers Gale doesn't have a gag reflex at the same time he feels the tight clutch of Gale's throat around his cock. Gale's eyes close as he groans, hands shaping and molding at John's thighs, but John doesn't move until Gale tugs him forward in a wordless plea.

He doesn't once let go, so John doesn't once stop, pressing the top of his head to the flat of the headboard as he rolls his hips, watching his cock disappear in and out of Gale's mouth. He alternates squeezing his eyes shut, determined to hold out for as long as he can, and opening his eyes to drink in Gale's face—but his favorite moments are when he pulls out to let Gale catch his breath, his cockhead shiny where Gale's bottom lip drags against it. It doesn't hurt Gale starts tonguing John's cock everywhere he can reach even while still panting. For once, his oral fixation is driving John mad with the promise of relief at something other than his own hand. (For all that he's proud of his imagination, it pales in the face of reality.)

Once John finds a steady tempo that suits them both, he shifts, propping his forearm against the headboard, and drops one hand to Gale's face. Gale inhales sharply through his nose, eyes opening, when John cards his fingers through Gale's soft hair, tangling and tugging. His pupils are blown so wide little blue remains.

"Look at you," John murmurs. "Pretty as a picture."

With a low moan, Gale drops his hands away. John stops, pulling out so Gale can speak, though he's not mentally prepared for the rasp of his cock-hoarse voice: "Kindly desist unless you want me to come."

John swallows. "Soft for a bit of hair-pulling?"

"Not soft, no." At John's snort, Gale's lips quirk. "Also, fuck my throat."

John plants his hand back onto the headboard lest he collapse. "Fucking *shit*, Gale."

"And come in my mouth," Gale adds and palms John's thighs once more.

The first time Gale swallows around John, a moan cracks out of John's chest, so Gale does it again and again until John closes his eyes once more and surrenders. With every sound he earns, every squeeze of

Gale's hands, every time he feels Gale's throat tight around him, he finds himself tipping, tipping, tipping toward the end, heat ratcheting.

Then Gale slides one hand to John's ass, pressing the pad of his thumb hard to John's hole with just a hint of fingernail catching at the rim, and it's all over. He has just enough presence of mind to babble a warning, to obey Gale's push so just John's cockhead is in his mouth, and then his vision whites out. He's pretty sure he even hears the headboard groan under his grip, but it's all drowned in static.

When he comes back to himself in bits and pieces, he discovers Gale evidently swallowed. And if his expression is to be believed, the cat got the canary, too. Now he explores John's thighs with his hands, though he has to angle his head to better see them, since John sank to sit on his chest without realizing it. At least he managed to keep most of his weight off him, else Gale probably wouldn't be able to breathe.

"Y'all right?"

Gale looks up at him, mouth gently curving in a smile. "Welcome back."

John snorts and finally releases the headboard, shuffling back to plant his hands on the mattress on either side of Gale's head. Then John dips for a kiss, and Gale sucks in a breath as if surprised before kissing John back. But John's never shied from kissing someone after receiving head. Not everyone enjoys it, but he doesn't mind it.

"Water?" John says, tracing his thumb along the dip below Gale's bottom lip.

When Gale hums, John rolls out of bed and ducks into the bathroom. It's impossible to not peek at himself in the mirror, to not take in the flush to his cheeks and his chest, the red lines darkening on his thighs where Gale dug his nails in. But it's the smile John can't shake that truly boggles the mind. To think, this time last night, he was fucking a woman whose name he can't remember in an attempt to get over Gale. And now he has gotten over Gale, but in a way far different than planned. (It's so stupid he laughs.)

John fills a glass with water from the sink and drinks it, then refills it and brings it out to Gale, who has somehow found another piece of chocolate. He doesn't even have to ask this time. When John rejoins him on the bed, John simply opens his mouth and Gale pops the candy in. It tastes sweet on his tongue, but it's better on Gale's.

“How do you want me?” Gale asks and sets the empty glass on the nightstand.

“On your stomach,” John says. When Gale turns over without fuss, John’s mouth goes dry. Shameless and helpless in equal measure, he tips forward and bites down, hard, on one of Gale’s cheeks. Gale yelps, slapping at John’s head, but laughs when John laughs, and goes easily when John tucks a pillow under his hips. Gale might not be as experienced as John, but he’s certainly not shy. Not even with his ass propped up for John’s viewing pleasure.

While John’s here, he closes his hand around Gale’s cock to stroke it back to full hardness while kissing a hot line up Gale’s spine to his neck, then all the way back down. He catches precome on his thumb and brings that thumb to Gale’s ass, smoothing the pad of it over his hole. Gale bites a sound into a mouthful of sheets. Humming, John guides his knees a bit further apart, then settles between them, sliding his hands up the back of Gale’s thighs.

“You look good from this angle,” he says.

“Fuck off,” Gale mumbles into the mattress.

Laughing, John massages the muscle, from ass to thighs and back again. Little by little Gale relaxes, ceases to hold himself quite so stiffly. John wants him to enjoy this, but he knows it can take a bit of time and effort to get used to. (Women have done it for him in the past, since Gale is the first man he’s ever slept with. He never met a man before Gale who made him want to risk more than looking from afar.)

Then he gets a firm grip on Gale’s ass with both hands and drags his tongue right over Gale’s rim. The sound Gale makes gets muffled by a mouthful of sheets, shoved between his teeth. It’s probably a good thing, considering they’re in a hotel room—even one so far-removed—but John is greedy. He’s only done this for a few women in the past, the more adventurous ones, or the ones who might have been queer, too. Most liked it. John knows he’s rusty, given he hasn’t done this since before the war, but his technique is sound.

He sets to his task with determination, and it isn’t long before Gale starts to rock with every slide and thrust of John’s tongue, every flick and swirl. By the time John can press his tongue in, Gale is worked up enough that the sound he makes is louder than any before it, desperate and rough. John finds a good rhythm and slips one hand up

to wrap around Gale's cock. There's another groan, so he tightens his hand for Gale to have a tunnel to fuck into. Then he wipes his other hand on the bed and gets a better grip on Gale's ass. He seems to respond more to a firmer touch, so John firms up his tongue, fucking more than laving.

It earns him precome on his fingers, and he can't help but pull his hand free to get a taste. Gale makes a noise of protest, so John murmurs an apology right into his ass, which makes him shiver and mumble something about frisson.

Encouraged, John returns his hand to Gale's cock and his tongue to Gale's ass, already feeling his own heart beating faster, his own cock taking renewed interest. It doesn't escape his notice that this is likely the most vulnerable Gale has ever allowed himself to be. It's a bit overwhelming, to know Gale has torn down his walls enough to allow John into the other side. It lights a flame in John's chest, drips heat down his spine, prompts him to shift how he's kneeling and add a finger alongside his tongue. The groan Gale gifts him is like the moment a plane lifts off the runway. John has always loved making the people he fucks feel good; it's the main reason he has sex, his own pleasure secondary to reducing his partner to a puddle of sensations.

But there's a particular note to what Gale makes him feel in the act. One he can't quite name, but sits in his chest, warm as a glowing coal. He's never felt it before, has no idea what to call it, but it feels oddly…safe.

He curls his finger in search of Gale's prostate, huffing a relieved breath at the way Gale startles when he finds it. John massages it, just so, and feels more precome blurt over his fingers. This time he resists the urge to taste, instead using it to better slick the way. Gale mumbles something, but it's so muffled and raspy that it's little more than gibberish. John can guess, though, so he doubles down, tongue firm, finger curled, hand tight.

When Gale comes, John maintains every bit of pressure he can, everywhere they're connected, dragging it out and out and out, until Gale finally stills, muscles going lax. Slowly, John pulls his hand away, straightening up to look at the back of Gale's head while he rubs his finger over his prostate, just a little longer.

Gale curses and shudders once more. John, smug, finally pulls away to rest his hands on the back of Gale's thighs. They both need a minute to catch their breath, and John can't stop pressing his fingers into

Gale's muscle, putty as he now is.

Then John says, "So? Thumbs up, thumbs down, thumbs in the middle?"

Gale raises both middle fingers.

"You're a fuckin' delight," John says, which isn't what he wants to say, but it's all he'll allow himself to admit out loud. Then he rolls forward and flattens himself to Gale's back, pressing his face into Gale's neck. John is well past five o'clock shadow, and he has a mustache, so Gale will probably be feeling the burn of stubble on his ass. There's no reason he can't feel it on his neck, too, amongst all the bites and kisses.

(John was right. He could make a home here.)

Eventually, Gale turns his head to kiss him properly. He doesn't let it go very deep—John did just have his mouth on his ass—but it's more than John was expecting and he hums into it. It's little more than what their very first kiss was, but this feels somehow different.

When is a kiss more than just a kiss?

After John brushes his teeth, he returns to flop beside Gale, moonlight pouring in through the windows. It paints half of Gale in silver; the other half is gilded in the lamplight. When John looks, Gale is already looking back, his expression soft, his lips gently parted. John has no idea what time it is and no desire to look at the clock on the nightstand. Far more important is petting Gale's hair, watching Gale close his eyes and tilt his head into the touch. One of his hands slides down to John's hip, then drags up his waist to curl long, callused fingers around his bicep. There, Gale simply holds on.

John loves him so much it threatens to choke him. He half-expects to taste blood.

"D'you wanna fuck me?" Gale asks.

"Yeah," John says.

They find themselves in the enormous bathtub (after John asks Gale to get the Crisco from the bedside drawer, and after Gale muses, "Think my cock's bigger" of the dildo, and after John shoves Gale up against the bathroom counter and kisses him stupid), their legs tangled in the hot, soapy water. John declares Gale much too far away and tugs him

into his lap, licking water off his shoulders, out of the dip of his collarbone. Content, Gale gathers up a bar of soap and takes his time massaging it into John's skin, and John closes his eyes and lets himself drift, lets himself imagine this isn't taking place in some New York hotel room but in a house they own together, last names on the shared mailbox, shoes tucked side by side in the foyer closet, spare bedroom unused but there to save face.

He wants it more than he's wanted anything in life. He wants it enough to bear the risks.

Gale's almost reverent as he massages shampoo into John's hair, as he washes it out, as he repeats the process with conditioner. John feels light and floaty, like if Gale weren't in his lap, he'd drift away. Then it's John's turn, and he starts with Gale's hair. When Gale's eyes slip closed, John is free to stare at him while he shampoos and rinses, conditions and rinses. He leans forward, kissing the scar on Gale's left cheek, and Gale takes a trembling breath. With soft fingers to his jaw, John tilts Gale's face to kiss the scar on his right cheek, too.

"John," Gale breathes, like he simply enjoys the shape of John's name in his mouth.

John hums and reaches for the bar of soap, lathers his palms, cleans Gale's body with a reverence he has never shown anything or anyone. Gale's cock is growing hard, and John is no less affected, but he takes his time. He's selfish and flighty, always has been, eager for the next drink, the next fuck, the next mission—he's a junkie for adrenaline, a glutton for pleasure. What he wants, he takes, content in the knowledge life is so very fleeting. Best enjoy it while it lasts.

It's a familiar refrain, but while he's survived every drought before, he's sure every swallow, every taste, every flight after this first will be like drinking sand from a bottle he thought held water. No one and nothing will ever compare.

He's generous with the Crisco as he slowly works Gale open. Gale is already loose from the attention of John's mouth, but John takes his time anyway, introducing one finger, letting it stay awhile, and introducing a second, and eventually a third. Gale's hips roll with each deep thrust, head dropped back when John needs a taste of warm skin, and head tipped forward when Gale needs to sip salvation from John's lips. The water ripples around them, bubbles pop, and John learns what it means to make love when he sinks into Gale's body.

Gale takes over, one hand on the nape of John's neck, the other palming John's cheek, fingertips tucked in his hair and thumb dusting over his cheekbone. He doesn't look away even when every slow roll of their hips makes his mouth nudge against John's, bottom lip catching top, top catching bottom. John's eyes burn, a lump settles in his throat, but it's not until Gale's thumb brushes the stray tear away that he realizes it's even there.

"John," Gale sighs, like he's asked himself a question and breathed the answer aloud.

It's cruelty in the sweetest shape, and John doesn't know how he'll survive giving Gale up. Gale has cracked open the cage of John's ribs, made space for himself in the raw flesh of John's heart, and to remove him might break something vital, might make the flimsy castle of cards propped up with every one of John's smiles come tumbling down.

It's both anguish and relief when John comes. He groans and Gale catches the sound in his own mouth with a kiss. John kisses back, breathes the bloody shape of his love into Gale's lungs, desperate for the moment Gale's teeth sink in. Gale comes, and the bite splits John in two.

# # #

John wakes to a soft laugh. Inhaling through his nose, he stretches and finds his body deliciously sore in all the right places. He pats across the bed in search of Gale but comes up empty-handed and frowns, then lifts his head from his pillow to find Gale by the ajar balcony door. In nothing but John's robe, the long lines of his body illuminated by the soft light of early morning, he stands looking out over the city with the beige telephone receiver to his ear. One finger plays with the spiral cord. John spends his time being unobserved wisely: ogling every inch of bare skin on display.

Then Gale glances at him and smiles, and John smiles back, mouthing, "Who is it?"

"Marge," Gale mouths before he looks away, eyes unfocused.

It's a relief. He won't bear witness to the weight of reality crashing back down on John, like that rattling touchdown in Algeria, unsure they'd even make it. He knew this was coming, knew last night wouldn't continue into this morning, but perhaps a naïve part of him hoped he'd at least have a bit of warning first. That it wouldn't be the

first thing he'd have to confront before at least a cup of coffee.

Closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose, he listens to Gale talk without hearing what he's saying, but the affection in his voice is unmistakable. John hates that he hates it, because the truth is he loves Marge, too. She's perfect for Gale, and Gale is perfect for her. John is the odd one out. Whatever yesterday was, it won't be happening again. (For all John knows, Gale and Marge came to some kind of agreement: Gale would get John out of his system before going home to her and putting the war behind him, leaving John a footnote in the biography of Gale's life. The mere notion of it curdles in his stomach.)

He throws off the duvet, and when Gale glances over at him, John shakes his head and ducks into the bathroom, then shuts and locks the door. It's only as he drops back against it that he realizes he never got dressed after their bath last night. They dried off and simply crawled under the covers. For all that the bed is enormous, they didn't act like it: John fell asleep as the little spoon. And his body bears all the marks of Gale's hands, his mouth. John covers that bite on his chest with one palm. The bruise aches. It'll heal, but John doubts he will.

There's another soft laugh from the other side of the door. He pushes off it and turns on the tap to drown Gale out, avoiding eye contact with himself in the mirror as he takes a piss, washes his hands, brushes his teeth. He doesn't dare emerge until he hears only silence.

"Marge all right?" he asks as he crosses to the dresser, avoiding Gale's gaze as studiously as he did his own.

"Yeah," Gale says from what sounds like the vanity chair. A rustle of paper suggests he's looking through something. The room service menu, perhaps. Last night they'd talked about ordering in, bodies curved together, voices hushed. "I was supposed to call her to tell her when I found you, but yesterday got away from me."

It sounds like he's smiling. John tastes bile. He tugs on a clean pair of skivvies, then steps into his trousers as calmly as he can.

"How do waffles sound?" Gale asks.

John could never hate him, but he resents him just a little for how casual he sounds, talking about waffles instead of just letting John down easy. "Hmm," John says, not bothering to tuck in his shirt before fetching his socks.

"You goin' somewhere?"

“Yeah, need to, er, just…” He trails off, waves his hand, shoves his feet into his boots without lacing them up.

“Bucky,” Gale says, alarmed, “what’re you—”

“I’ll be right back,” he says, scanning the floor for his wallet. He has no idea where it wound up and doesn’t want to waste time looking, so he just turns for the door. It’s not like he has the appetite for breakfast anyway. “Just gotta, y’know, do the thing at the—”

“*Bucky*.”

Gale beats him to the door, cashmere robe swirling around his knees as he slaps his hand to it seconds before John grips the doorknob. John turns it anyway, but Gale shoves himself between John and the door, holding it shut with his weight. John clenches his teeth, looks away, hates his eyes for burning.

“You are *not* walking out on me, John Egan,” Gale says, tone holding the same kind of tempered fury it did when he ordered Friedkin to take everything the Germans had to throw at them. (Gale’s radio was on. They all heard it—it’s why he was put forward for a Distinguished Service Cross. John isn’t too proud to admit he got a semi from Gale’s voice. Given John spent most of that mission over Regensberg in a state of controlled panic, it was a very confusing moment for him.) “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

John flexes his jaw, takes a breath, and forces himself to meet Gale’s gaze. “Does Marge know we fucked?” he asks, brittle.

Gale’s brows furrow. “I mean, I’m sure she assumes we did, but I didn’t come right out and *say it* to her.”

“And she’s okay with it?”

“I don’t—” Gale stops, frown deepening, and starts again. “John, why does that—”

“Because I like Marge, and doing this to her…” He shakes his head and looks away again. He can’t say this and look at Gale at the same time. “Last night shouldn’t have happened.”

A sound cracks out of Gale’s chest, like John just punched him in the gut. John certainly feels it in his own. “Why?”

“Because you can call me a lot of things,” John says, unable to rid his

voice of its tremble, “but cruel ain’t one of them, and it doesn’t fit you either, so it’s not fair to Marge what we did. So I need to go before you fuck up the one good thing in your life. Just leave me behind, Gale. Leave me in the war, and just-just forget—”

Hands grab his cheeks and a mouth crashes into his, and John’s feet get swept out from under him, Gale a riptide he has no hope of escaping. It would be worth it to drown. He bows forward, slapping his palms to the door as he sinks into the bite of Gale’s kiss, lets himself be devoured. He’s weak and he’s wanting, and he’s selfish and he’s starving, and he hates himself, he loves Gale, he wishes there was a world outside this hotel room that he could be part of like he wants to. He wishes who he is could fit.

“Gale,” he gasps, tearing his mouth away, “you can’t—”

“Shut the fuck up about what I *can’t*, John Egan,” Gale hisses, refusing to let John go, their faces so close that features blur. “’Cause if you think for a fuckin’ *second* that I could ever forget you, I might need to punch some sense into you. D’you honestly believe I—”

“Marge is—”

Gale hauls him forward, their foreheads colliding with a solid *thud*. John doesn’t want to meet his gaze, but Gale gives him no choice. (John couldn’t close his eyes if he tried.) “Marge is queer and so am I, and when I met you and she saw how I watched you, we decided we’d use each other to hide. You ever hear of the term ‘beard,’ Bucky? She’s mine and I’m hers. Peggy, that girl you danced with the night before you shipped out? She’s Marge’s girlfriend. Has been for years, but if people knew that…I don’t think I need to explain what would happen.” His grip softens, his fingers carding through John’s hair to cup the back of his head. “There ain’t anything Marge needs to forgive us for, any more than we’d need to forgive her.”

John stares at him and sucks in a breath. It hurts. “Then what about asking her to marry you? Askin’ me to be your—”

“We were sharin’ a bunk,” he says, like it’s obvious. “I couldn’t let anyone realize it wasn’t just ’cause of the cold. I wasn’t risking your safety.”

“The other boys shared bunks, too.”

“For all I knew, I’d wake up dry humping you and give myself away. And anyway, you weren’t yourself in the stalag, John. I had to look

out for you, same as you did for me. I thought, since I couldn't say exactly what I was feeling, I could just…tell you, in other ways, that I wanted you in my life even after the war ends. That I saw you in it, even in peacetime."

Hands still flat to the door, John pushes away from Gale to look at him at arm's length. His cheeks are flushed, eyes wet, and each breath trembles on the way out. He looks like, if John breathed too hard, he'd fall apart, seams unraveling, strings snipped. "And getting on that train?" he asks. "Sayin' goodbye?"

Gale breaks John's gaze at last. "Well, you never said anything, either, and after you got back to Thorpe Abbotts and fuckin' *shook my hand*, I started to think maybe you just weren't—I thought you were queer, but that doesn't exactly mean you'd—" He sighs, brushing his hair out of his face. "Then I got halfway to Casper, realized I was makin' the biggest mistake of my life, and called Marge to talk some sense into me. She told me to go find you, so I did."

John knows Gale's said words, and that he knows the definitions of those words, but he doesn't actually recognize them when they're arranged in that order. Then Gale peeks at him, and John shoves away from the door and takes several steps back. Gale doesn't move save to rest his hand on the doorknob, like he needs to be sure it's still there. Or, more likely, to prevent John from reaching for it.

"Why didn't you just say something?" John asks.

Gale huffs a breath. "Why didn't you?"

"'Cause I thought you had Marge."

"Right." He clears his throat, looking down at his feet. "Y'know, I may be brave enough to cross the Channel in a bomber, but I never claimed to be brave enough for you. S'why I took you to Moonlight. I couldn't find the words, so I thought I'd just—show you what I couldn't say." He shrugs. "You like actions."

Grunting, John scrubs his hands over his face, then shoves them through his hair and says, "I need a minute," before opening the balcony door and stepping out onto it.

"That could've gone better," Gale mutters.

John shuts the door and sits down on one chair, the metal still clinging to the night's chill. It can't be later than eight or nine in the

morning, cars honking and people talking up and down the street. The balconies to the left and right of his own are empty. Birds soar up out of a nearby tree, as if startled from their roosts by something unseen.

Inhaling deep and exhaling slow, John thinks back to every time he's seen Marge and Gale together, behaving like two people who've grown up together and know they can hide behind a friendship, can let people make assumptions. If anyone saw Marge and Gale side by side, they'd obviously think they were a couple. Neither of them would even have to do anything out of the ordinary. And it makes sense they'd bring Peggy to that last night out before John flew to England—a double date, a way for Gale to linger with John and John to linger with Gale (and Peggy and Marge to spend time together without worrying they might be flirted with by a man who sees a seemingly single woman and decides to take a chance) and let people arrive at their own conclusions about who is really with who.

No wonder Marge and Peggy slipped away to play with the jukebox. Let the whole room assume Gale and John were simply waiting to dance with them rather than having a moment of rare, uninterrupted alone time.

And the longer John sits here, alone with his untied trooper boots, the more he starts to wonder what the fuck he's even doing. If Gale wants what John wants, and he's offering what John hopes he's offering, why resist?

The door opens and Gale pokes his head out. "I ordered room service, so it should be up in a minute. Got you a waffle. Mimicked your voice to do it, too."

"What do you want?" John asks, then realizes how that sounds and says, "I mean, from me, like this—What do you want? Why say all this now?"

Gale hesitates there on the threshold, then takes a single step onto the balcony. He got dressed while John was out here, and now stands buttoned up and spiffy in his tan shirt and trousers. He even combed his hair and hooked a toothpick in the corner of his mouth. They can't have the hotel staff knowing they spent the night in the same bed, after all. If John went inside, he's sure he'd find a blanket tossed over the sofa to play make believe—to let people see what they wanted, assume what they would. But he's still wearing the robe, sash untied, like he couldn't bring himself to give up the comfort of its cashmere.

“I don’t—” Gale stops, looking down at his bare feet. “What do you—”

“I asked you first. Before I—before”—he waves his hand at the room—“what were you hopin’ for?”

He peeks up at John like he’d really appreciate him being able to read minds, then sighs and eyes the banister, as if wondering about his ability to fly. “It’d be a lot easier if one of us was a woman, but…*that*. I want that, and all it implies.”

“That,” John repeats. He wants Gale to spell it out, to be sure he’s not reading into this.

“*That*. What men and women can have, and we can’t, for some godforsaken reason.”

“Last names on the shared mailbox, shoes tucked side by side in the foyer closet, spare bedroom unused but there to save face.”

Gale nods, then pauses. “Wait, do you—?”

John reaches out, snags both ends of the untied sash, and hauls Gale forward. He catches himself on John’s shoulders, but goes easily, settling in John’s lap, knees on either side of his hips. The chair is hardly large enough for two grown men, but Gale is skinny where John is broad, so they make it work. After a moment, Gale hauls the robe up over their heads, hiding them from the world at large. It’s unlikely anyone will be looking at their lone balcony—the nearest buildings with windows high enough look newly built, not yet occupied—but the shadow provides privacy and intimacy, and John can’t help but smile.

“Yeah,” John says. “I do.”

Gale exhales, smile slow to grow but brighter than the fucking sun. “Really?”

“Really.”

“You like me.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m not a fourth grader with a crush.”

“Well, I sure fuckin’ feel like one,” Gale says, laughing. “You *like* me, Bucky.”

It’s sweet in its taunting lilt, so John slides deeper into the seat,

knocking Gale forward so their chests collide and he can steal the toothpick from his mouth. “I’ll show you how much,” he says and kisses him, and Gale laughs right into it, smiling so wide the kiss is little more than a clack of teeth, but John is smiling, too, so it hardly matters.

When is a kiss more than just a kiss?

“I love you,” John says, and Gale makes a sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh, so John says it again, “I love you,” and Gale says, “Love you, too, Bucky,” and finally, properly kisses John, lips soft and sweet until John’s lips part. Gale takes the invitation.

It’s easy to lose track of time (perhaps it’s a good thing they didn’t get here before the war ended; they might have missed every mission) making out here on the balcony, hidden from view by a simple robe, but a knock on the hotel room door startles them apart. John stares up at Gale, breathing hard, and Gale stares down at him, flushed. The knock comes again, accompanied by “Room service!” so Gale pats John’s hair down and slides off his lap, adjusting himself in his pants. John simply looks at him, feeling Buck-drunk all over again, and doesn’t move until Gale shoves the robe at him and barks, “It’s your room!”

John has no idea what expression he’s wearing, but the staff member with the rolling cart doesn’t seem to notice anything amiss as John tips them (a bit too generously, but he’s feeling too happy to mind) and shuts the door. He arranges the cart in front of the sofa (which is, indeed, covered with a spare blanket and pillow) and then returns to the balcony to find Gale leaning against the wrought iron banister, fingers loosely laced as he peers down at the street far below. John joins him, just close enough that their shoulders brush. It’s not nearly enough, but it’ll have to do.

“Someplace quiet,” John says.

Gale glances at him sideways, one brow raised. The flush has faded from his cheeks, but his eyes are bright, his lips still red. John aches to kiss him.

“Hmm?” Gale asks.

“We’ll find a house somewhere quiet,” John says. “Where there’s miles between us and our nearest neighbors, so we can hold hands on the porch on summer mornings and kiss while building snowmen in the winter and not have to worry about bein’ seen.”

A smile steals across Gale's mouth. "You've thought about this."

"A few times," John says and pretends he isn't blushing. "The idea of it kept me company in the stalag."

Gale nudges his chin against John's shoulder, then presses his nose into the fabric of his shirt. "I want to go back to college eventually, and I doubt you'll be content with a quiet life forever. You'd get bored. Farming's not your style, Bucky."

"Two homes, then," John says. "We'll live in whichever city your school's in during the year, and I'll get a job while you go to class. And then in the summer and for holidays, we'll go to our little house in the peace and quiet. Forget the world for a while until we can stomach hidin' what we are again."

"One day, maybe the world will change," Gale says. "And we won't need to hide."

"Maybe," John agrees, and dusts his fingertips over the back of Gale's hand. Gale turns it over, and when John presses his fingers to Gale's palm, Gale closes his hand around them. "'Til then, I won't mind it bein' just me and you. And Marge and Peggy, obviously. Should probably go see them first, huh? Let 'em know we're still alive."

Gale nods, eyes closed, and smooshes his nose harder against John's shoulder (John can feel the shape of the smile he's trying to hide), and John says, "Love you, Buck," and Gale sighs and says, "Love you more, Bucky," and tips his head up to grin at John.

"Impossible," John says, but he's grinning, too.

Gale snorts. "I'm eating your waffle."

# # #

It turns out there's no way to use a hair dryer quietly, but John does his best—and thinks he succeeds until the bathroom door swings open to reveal a rumpled Gale, hair a mess, pillow crease on one cheek, John's skivvies too big around his hips and John's olive-green shirt gaping open. It's enough to make John momentarily forget the fact he's currently reheating a waffle on the bathroom counter at eight o'clock at night.

Then the metal barrel of the hair dryer meets his waist. Yelping, he straightens his arm with a glare at the thing. (How do women stand

using it every day?) Gale makes a sound somewhere between a snort and a grunt before shuffling the three feet between his head and John's shoulder. When he slings his arms around John's bare waist, John can't resist reaching up with his free hand to squeeze Gale's cheeks.

"Why are you blowin' hot hair on a waffle?" Gale asks.

"'Cause cold air wouldn't heat it up," John says.

"Oh." Gale watches John poke at it, then turn it over to heat the other side, too. "Why not just order another?"

"I think three orders of waffles in one day is a bit overkill. And 'sides, I'd rather not make people wonder what you're still doing in here."

"And what's wrong with eatin' it cold? Used to do it all the time as a kid."

"We're getting a divorce."

Gale just holds onto John's waist tighter, squishes his cheek against John's shoulder, and mumbles, "Already burned the receipt."

"For shame."

"You ran outta cigarettes. Had to roll one up special."

Snorting, John tilts his head into Gale's and waits for Gale to raise his gaze to meet his in the mirror, and he's not disappointed. Even when putting the sandman out of business, Gale's the prettiest thing he's ever seen. John can't help but smile at him, and Gale's smile goes bashful before he turns his face, buries it into John's neck, and mumbles something unintelligible.

"Missed that," John says.

Gale angles his head to free just his mouth. "Said stop lookin' at me like that."

"Like you're cute when you're sleepy? Like I like seein' you in my shirt and shorts?"

"Thought they were a bit big."

"Like I love you?"

Gale blows a raspberry into John's neck. John slaps at his hip.

"You leave a mark, you're talkin' our way outta it."

With a grumble, Gale closes his teeth on John's shoulder. It's flirting with danger, since his shirt collar might cover the mark if he wears a tie, but it might not if he doesn't. He doesn't protest. Instead, he simply turns the waffle over once more and covers Gale's hand with his on his belly. Seemingly content with the shape of the hickey, Gale returns his face to John's neck and peeks at him in the mirror with just one blue eye. The affection shines through, now that John isn't forcing himself to overlook it. John smiles. Gale smiles right back.

Eventually, Gale seems to give up on attempting to remain standing on his own and has left the effort up to John. "Go back to bed," John says, though he doesn't mind being Gale's sturdy fence post in the slightest. (It was what Gale called him not two minutes ago, mumbled into John's neck like some kind of bizarre wedding vow.)

"Mm, no," Gale slurs, eyes firmly shut. "I gotta keep you company while you warm up a waffle. S'a parent's duty. All the good parents are doin' it."

"You're falling asleep standing up."

"Am not."

"Well, don't come cryin' to me when you slump. You're the one who wanted to see how many orgasms I could wring outta you in a single day."

"Still think I could'a had at least another two."

"Sure, sweetheart."

Gale's face is reburied in John's neck. He's too sleepy to properly tease, but John fully intends to pull that name back out every time he wants to see what kind of reaction it'll earn him. It's not even been a day since that first "I love you," and he isn't sure it's even truly sunk in yet that he has Gale now, that Gale has him, but they have thousands more days to come—thousands more sleepy nights, thousands more slow mornings. Perhaps one day he'll get used to it.

Perhaps every day will still feel like the first.

"Glad Marge talked some sense into you," John says when they've

returned to the bed once again. Gale is lying down, eyes closed, and using John's thigh as his pillow. John is doing his best to not drop crumbs into Gale's hair as he tears bites off his waffle with his fingers. He doubts Gale would notice a few lost crumbs, but he'd probably realize what had happened if John started preening him like a monkey.

It's almost tempting to try it, but he's frankly too content, the night a dark cocoon around them, slashes of city lights peering into the room between half-drawn curtains. The only proper light comes from the lamp on the desk.

Gale hums. "S'bout time someone did."

"But y'know, there's one thing I've been meaning to ask: How'd you meet Angie?"

"She found me."

John pauses mid-chew. "What?"

"You weren't exactly subtle, Bucky. Pretty sure you told every single person you met here 'bout me. She overheard me askin' some girls about you, and recognized me from the description you gave." He snuffles his nose into John's bare hip. "Eyes blue as the sky, you said. Smile that'd make you think you met Jesus, and as someone who is agnostic, I considered takin' offense to such a statement, but you're a good li'l catholic boy, so I'll let it slide."

John considers this for a moment. For all that he waxed poetic about Gale, he has no actual memory of describing him, but it stands to reason he would. The entire reason he came to New York City was to get over him, so he would be on John's mind.

"They do say orgasms can make you feel like you've met God," John says and pops another bite of waffle into his mouth.

"I'll pass."

"On the orgasms? That's monastic of you."

"If you think monks weren't fuckin' each other every time Jesus blinked—" Gale bites down on John's hip, *hard*. John shivers, cock taking sudden renewed interest (he didn't have as many orgasms as Gale throughout the day, but that's only because he already knows his limits). It's a slow burn of a thing, though, the kind of arousal you

want to let simmer because it's nearly as good as coming, so he lets it lie and takes another bite of waffle.

"And anyway," Gale adds once he's eased his teeth out of John's hip, "I already got an altar to worship at."

John peers down at him. "That so?"

"Mmhmm." Gale takes another bite of John's hip, but goes abruptly still when John fusses with his hair. Sniffing, he tilts his head sideways to glare up at John. "Did you get waffle in my hair, Bucky?"

"Heaven *forbid*."

"You are so fuckin' lucky I love you," Gale mutters and returns to marking his territory.

"Yeah, I am." John grins.

End Notes

Fun fact #1: When we watched Masters of the Air, my brother asked me what I'd name my fort. He'd name his Barf Bag (he, like Crosby, suffers from horrible air sickness, though unlike Croz my brother's doesn't go away after his body acclimates because his body never acclimates). I said mine would be Forty-Three Feral Hogs. Behold!

Fun fact #2: I wrote this fic almost entirely to Måneskin (hi Nici!), which means "moonlight" in Danish. Thus, the name of the nightclub was born.

Fun fact #3: I wanted to recreate that scene Bucky takes Paulina dancing. Hopefully I did it justice. ✌🏻

Thanks so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed! 🖤 As always, I'm spaceshipkat on tumblr.

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